Passage to Promise Land: Voices of Chinese Immigrant Women to Canada, by Vivienne Poy

October 10, 2014

By Cristina Pietropaolo

Passage to Promise Land: Voices of Chinese Immigrant Women to Canada is a thoroughly researched and eloquent documentation of the experiences of twenty-eight women of different ages (the oldest in their nineties and the youngest in their thirties) who emigrated from the southern coastal region of China to Canada between 1950 and 1990. Vivienne Poy, an historian, entrepreneur, and former member of the Senate, began the book as an extension of her doctoral research about the agency of Chinese women immigrants and the choices they were able to make for themselves and their families. The women in her book, she argues, were determined and able to navigate their own futures. She also notes that for earlier generations of Chinese women, leaving China gave a certain sense of empowerment and a release from the cultural traditions that dictated so much of their lives; that while complex and difficult to negotiate, immigration could also be empowering and full of opportunity.

288 pages, $39.95.

Poy herself emigrated from China as a young woman in 1959. Her own experience inspired her research, and she sought other Chinese women with similar stories of migration. Writing “as an immigrant Chinese woman [herself] who came from Hong Kong and whose ancestors originated in the Pearl River Delta” she “felt very comfortable with [her] informants”(7). The resulting book is a portrait of Chinese immigrant women’s history in Canada, and a record of how integral these women were, and continue to be, in “building successful communities” for Chinese Canadians. (4)

Poy begins with an introductory overview of Chinese history in Canada, but the real starting point for her book is the year 1950; this year was significant, because it was the first year that Chinese men were permitted to bring their dependents to Canada, resulting in the reunification of families and the large-scale presence of Chinese immigrant women in Canada for the first time. Threaded through the interviews is a carefully traced chronology of the murky Canadian immigration laws (and eventually multicultural policies) that directly shaped and impacted the lives of these women who came to Canada.

Immigration history in Canada has tended to, more often than not, tell the story of men. The lives of women–especially immigrant women–have left fewer traces in the public record and have attracted less attention. As a result, their stories are generally not well-known. Although the history of Chinese women in Canada began with men’s work (consider the CP Railway), the overarching theme of Passage to Promise Land is women’s agency. In the introduction, Poy writes:
The book focuses on women’s agency, their experiences with patriarchy in Chinese culture, and how they dealt with different forms of discrimination in China and Canada. Through their voices, we hear of their immigration and settlement experiences after the repeal of Chinese exclusion. I use gender for historical analysis because women have a different perspective from men on events and on society in general (5-6).

Prior to the late 1940s, the official Canadian attitude towards immigration from China was profoundly racist. And even after the repeal of the most prejudicial laws laws—the “head tax” on immigrants in 1923, the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1947—immigrants from China and their descendants still faced discrimination in their day-to-day lives. Poy’s book therefore also challenges the notion that Canada today is a post-racial society, and the oversimplified notion of immigration as a simple progression of steps. Her book documents the ways in which Chinese people were discriminated against in the past, and the less-overt ways that they continue to be discriminated against today. Her book also challenges narratives of immigrant history that tend to either romanticize or victimize immigrants. Immigration experiences were complex, and as Poy remarks in the introduction, “in listening to the stories, it became apparent that the notions of victimization and agency were not clear-cut.” (8) In the conclusion, she echoes this earlier statement:

With regard to the issues of patriarchy and racial and gender discrimination, my informants have all found their own agency in fighting for their rights, which proves that the view of Chinese woman as victims is only partially true. (192)

The stories of the women themselves, whether sad, joyful, difficult, are moving to read, and give insight into the complexities of navigating lives which were often dictated by external factors like government policy, immigration officers, income, and of course, the intricacies of race and gender. Poy has done her interviewees justice by filling the bulk of the book with long passages excerpted from interviews, in which these women shared some of the most painful or happy details of their life experiences. Building a rapport with her subjects was important to her, and every time a new voice is introduced, she takes care to note the history of her relationship with the interviewee. Poy is also notes where interviews were conducted, and in what language the interview took place –Cantonese, Szeyup (a dialect from the south region), and sometimes English. When she interrupts these passages, it is to interject with contextual clarification, or to draw the reader’s attention to a detail that might otherwise be overlooked. Poy does not judge or marginalize, but treats the voices of her interviewees respectfully. She reflected in the conclusion that although she had been warned that it might be difficult to get some women to open up, she

found that the interviewees were happy to have someone interested in their stories, since women’s experiences have often been dismissed or regarded as unimportant. After our conversations, several of the women told me that they felt a load had been lifted from them (203).

As a folklorist and ethnographer, I had to stop and marvel at the deft hand Vivienne Poy used in allowing her interviewees the space to tell what she called their “integration stories.” This is what ethnographers are trained to do, but only rarely is that training so elegantly executed. Her book makes an important contribution to Canadian social history, and I highly recommend it to any reader interested in this relatively unknown aspect of the immigrant experience. Moreover, it should also be read because it is written so engagingly; it is exemplary scholarship, fluid, thoughtful and accessible. Simply put, Poy lets the women she interviews speak for themselves, and their stories are fascinating and deeply moving.

Cristina has an MA in Folklore from Memorial University of Newfoundland. She blogs about CanLit, researches immigrant gardens and vernacular Toronto architecture, and is beginning a PhD at the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh.